Original Article

THE ADULT LEARNER AND THE EFFICACY OF

COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Competency based learning or Competence based education (CBE) has been around since the 1930s. However, in recent times, school systems, institutions of higher education, corporate training programs, educators and policy makers have embraced and supported this methodology that radically changes the approach to education (Priest, Rudenstine, & Weisstein, 2012). CBE is of particular importance to adult learners, given the inherent philosophical underpinning of this approach. This paper synthesizes the literature on competency based education to unearth some of the salient benefits that CBE offers learners who are engaged by this educational model.

KEYWORDS: Competency Based Education, Competency Based Learning, Adult Education, Adult Learning, Non-Traditional Learners

INTRODUCTION

Background

Competency based education as a strategy to educate children, college students, and adults has been taking shape in the U.S. and globally since the 1960s (Brown, 1994; Hodges & Harris, 2012). However, in recent years, CBE has become one of the most hotly debated topics in higher education. This debate is propelled by the need for colleges and universities throughout the U.S. to become more relevant, affordability, and to accurately measure students' outcomes. This deliberation is increasingly more salient, as more people become disenfranchised from not having access to affordable higher education. Competencies are the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are necessary for an individual to be competitive in the 21st century workplace. (Dosi and Teece, 1993; Dubois & Rothwell, 2004; Klein-Collins, R. 2012; Leonard-Barton, 1992).

The Purpose of This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to:

- Create greater awareness and understanding about the competency based education/learning.

- Identify some of the benefits of competency based education.

Definition of Competency Based Education?

How competency is based education defined? Competency based education or learning is an educational program or system that is focused on learning outcomes. CBE embraces the notion that education should focus mainly on learners mastering certain predetermined skills and knowledge. This learning can be derived from multiple sources, including work experiences, online or onsite facilitation, internships, mentoring and others

(Priest, Rudenstine, & Weisstein, 2012; Sursock, Smidt, & Davies, 2010; Herrscher, & Watkins, 1980). With CBE, education should not just situated around abstract theoretical concepts. The primary focus of competency based education is on learning outcomes, in this case what the participants have learned. CBE focuses on ensuring that participants have mastery of specific targeted skills. Thus, through a competency based program, there is the enhanced propensity to move away from seat time, and to embrace curricula that allow for greater flexibility that create opportunities for students' progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic contents, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning (Hatcher Group, 2014; NACCUA, 2014).

The notion of a standardized competence based program that can be replicated and retrofitted is non-existent. Instead there are basic Assumptions and features about competency based education that is adaptable. According to Priest, Rudenstine, & Weisstein, (2012), "There is no single blueprint for competency education initiatives, so it is virtually impossible to find a published curriculum that fits any individual program's often customized design needs. Rather than buying textbooks or "off-the-shelf" online courses, some teachers are designing their curriculum from scratch while others are building on existing materials", pp viii.

Competency-based approaches provide learners greater flexibility on how college credit can be earned or awarded. Competency based education, foster greater opportunities for idiosyncratic and personalized approaches to learning. Learners who engage in CBE programs are self-paced and have the support of academic mentors or tutors. Many CBE programs are facilitated online. However, there are other modalities through which such learning can occur including; face to face classroom style learning, blended learning, community self-directed learning, duel enrollment, and joint high school-college programs. Though such array of modalities, adult learners have greater opportunity to access to higher education, which could ultimately culminate in better students' engagements as they opt for educational programs that are relevant to their needs and compliment their lifestyles (Jones and Voorhees 2002).

Competency based programs create distinct advantages for students. They can master predetermined skills at their own pace. Competency-based approaches are cost effective and are less time consuming (Ford, 2014). Participants in competency based programs are usually charged a flat rate instead of paying per credit hours (Klein-Collins, R. 2012). CBE optimizes the use of technology, utilizes educators and facilitators skills in different ways, and create learning opportunities outside of the traditional mode of operandi. All of these factors allow learners to have greater opportunities to achieve specific learning needs. Competency based approach to learning can lead to greater efficiency and increase productivity.

Competency based education has broader implications for the institutions that embrace this educational model. CBE with laser-like precision; focus on successful learning outcomes, and requirements for demonstration of competencies by participants. Greater number of adult students might be drawn to educational programs that espouse and authenticate this educational philosophy (Jones and Voorhees 2002). With intense competition for a finite number of students, CBE programs could be strategically poised in the recruitment and persistence of students.

The Adult Learners (Non-Traditional Learners)

The adult learners (non-traditional) are individuals who are pursuing a course of study but are not classified as typical traditional college age students (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). There is a cadre of these students participating in higher education who are underserved by the traditional educational institutions. These are generally

working adults whose schedules do not fit into the dogmatic structures and curriculums of traditional institutions and programs. Confronted with responsibilities, obligations and life circumstances, many working adults do not have the indulgence of attending classes during the days when many traditional educational programs are convened. These adult learners (non-traditional) are now served by innovative programs and institutions that have responded to their educational needs (Hatcher Group, 2014). Faced with decreased enrolments, many traditional institutions have now fashioned programs that are more responsive to the needs of these non-traditional adult learners.

Benefits of Competency-Based Education to Adult Learners

Challenged with rapid changes and increased global competition, many working adults are seeking various ways to acquire new skills and training to remain competitive and relevant in the workplace. The competency-based models of higher education seem to be well suited to those adult learners who want to leverage the benefits from acquiring addition skills and educational opportunities. Competency based education is conducive to adult learners especially when the facilitation is online; correspondingly, participants work at their own pace, in an asynchronous environment non-threating environment (Ford, 2014; Klein-Collins, R. 2012).

There are several benefits to adult learner who participate in competency based educational programs. It should be noted that these benefits are not unique to the adult learners but can be extended to all learners who are engaged in CBE programs. A synthesis of the literature on CBE has narrowed these benefits to the following:
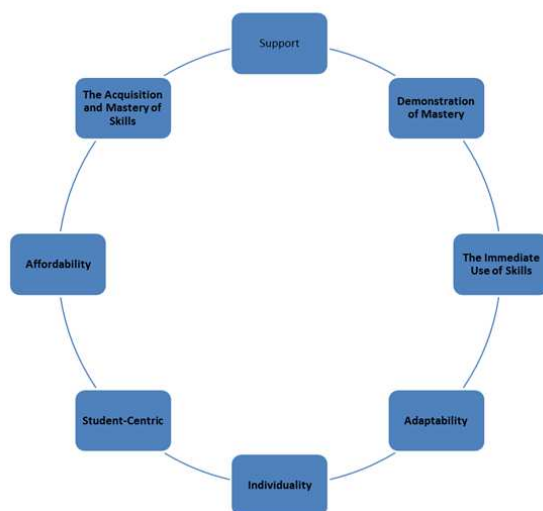

Figure 1: Benefits of Competence Based Education to Students

CONCLUSIONS

Competency based education has been a part of the American educational landscape for over four decades. However, there is a dearth of understanding about this educational model and the implications and impact on learning outcomes. In recent years there have been a surge in the number of higher educational institutions, public and for profits that have embraced CBE. While competency based education is not the panacea for the challenges confronting education in America, it holds several potential benefits and advantages for learners. The purpose of this paper was to create greater awareness and understanding of CBE and to illuminate the benefits to participants. CBE is particularly appropriate for non-traditional students, many of whom are working adults. Technological advancement coupled with asynchronous online

learning, makes CBE appropriate and appealing to adult learners. The trajectory of CBE programs, provide non-traditional learners an array of educational opportunities not offered by other educational models.

Competency based education focuses the achievement of specific learning outcomes, including the development of predetermined competencies and skills. This motivation can lead to greater accountability and theoretically greater success for students. CBE is well suited to non-traditional students, many of whom have been underserved and marginalized by traditional educational models.

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